*The Department of Redundancy Department*



by Richard Lederer

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On the grounds of St. Paul’s School, where I have taught English for almost three decades, stand two signs that announce, “Private Property: No Trespassing Without Permission.” Early in my career at the school I explained to the administration that the warning was redundant, that by definition the act of trespassing is committed without permission. My suggestions that the last two words in the signs be painted out were met with polite smiles, but tradition endures and prevails in New England boarding schools. Now more than twenty-five years later, the signs still stand and so do their messages. Unauthorized visitors are still required to obtain permission before they trespass on our grounds.

I am surrounded by an army of recurrently repetitive redundancies. In fact, I am completely surrounded. Even more than that, I am completely surrounded on all sides. These repeated redundancies are in close proximity to my immediate vicinity, which is a lot worse than their being in distant proximity in a vicinity far away.

I turn on the radio or television and learn that “at 10 a.m. in the morning” a man has been found “fatally slain,” “leaving no living survivors,” that three convicts “have successfully escaped” (how else does one do it?), that “foreign imports” are threatening to destroy the balance of trade (by outnumbering the domestic imports, presumably), that the weather is “minus ten degrees below zero,” and etc., etc.

Sports announcers inform me that a certain full-back has had his “forward progress stopped,” that a promising young athlete “has a fine future ahead of him” (while my athletic future is long behind me), and that a track star has just set a “new record,” a feat much more newsworthy than setting an old record.

I am adrift in a sea of American overspeak. The sea is a perfectly appropriate metaphor here, for the word *redundancy* is a combination of the Latin *undare*, “to overflow” and *re-*, “back,” and literally means “to overflow again and again,” which may itself be a bit redundant. It may come as an unexpected surprise (even more surprising than an expected surprise) that the ancient Greeks had a name for this rhetorical blunder– *pleonasmus*.

Richard Nixon eulogized the life of statesman Adlai Stevenson with these words: “In eloquence of expression he had no peers and few equals.” Peers are not superiors; they *are* equals. When asked about his vice-presidential ambitions, Mayor Robert Wagner of New York said, “I have reiterated over and over again what I have said before.” Other gems of political overspeak include “I’m in favor of letting the status quo stay as it is,” “I’m going to proceed ahead. Someone has to do it,” and “In the 1930s

we were not just a nation on our backs. We were “prone on our backs.” I assure you that none of these examples is a figment of my imagination, or a figment of any other part of me. They are all true facts.

The pervasive and persuasive messages of advertising are fraught with false pretenses, which are a lot more dangerous than true pretenses. The hucksters think they can treat us all like country bumpkins, even us city bumpkins. One stack of products is “100 percent pure” certainly more pristine than being fifty percent pure. Other product boxes trumpet the arrival of a “bold, new innovation,” which sure beats any bold, old innovation, that is “new and improved.” (Can something really be new *and* improved?)

McDonald’s hamburger emporia boasts of “Billions and Billions Served,” and I wonder if billions and billions is more than mere billions. Appliance companies keep flooding the market with hot-water heaters, even though these machines are obviously made to heat cold water. And Raid insecticide “kills bugs dead,” which is just the way they should be killed.

All this linguistic overkill reminds me of Vaughn Monroe’s hit song of the 1950s, “There, I’ve Said It Again” and stirs within me not just a sensation, but one singular sensation. “Save 40% off!” blares the typical special-sale sign. A Tucson strip joint advertises “Totally, totally nude! Live girls,” much more entertaining than partially nude dead girls. Various hotels promise “a honeymoon for two”–the old-fashioned kind! Of all the adspeak that clogs my mailbox the most repetitively redundant is “free gift.” Sometimes I am even offered a “complimentary free gift.” I sigh with relief, grateful that I won’t have to pay for that gift.

My fellow colleagues and classmates, I am here to tell you the honest truth, not to be confused with the dishonest truth, about redundancies. My past experience, which is a lot more reliable than my present or future experience, tells me that overspeak will not go away. The past history of the pleonasm gives us but a small inkling (can an inkling ever be large?) of the pleonasm that will fill our future history. Embedded in the idea of experience and history is the past, yet we persist in talking about someone’s past experience and past history. Plans and warnings, in contrast, are by definition futuristic, yet every day we hear about future plans, advance warnings, and forewarnings. This chronic and chronological confusion is exemplified by the pretentious prefix *pre-*, as in *preboard, preheat, pretest, preplan,* and *prerecord.* While I concede that boarding, testing, and heating may be two-stage processes, I don’t see how preplanning and prerecording differ from planning and recording. I have even seen shows “prerecorded before a live audience,” certainly preferable to prerecording before a dead audience.

I do not overexaggerate, much less exaggerate, when I say that far and away, the one and only pleonasm I most hate with a passion (rather than calmly hating it) is “at this point in time.” Either “at this point” or “at this time” will do just fine, and “now” is even better. “At this point in time” is the bureaucrat’s way of spelling “now” by using seventeen letters. This atrocity elicits from this old geezer (I confess that I am no longer a young geezer) an audible (louder than an inaudible) groan, exacerbates all my aches and pains, and sets me not just to ranting or to raving, but to ranting and raving. I am not just bound or just determined but bound and determined to stamp out the last vestige, rather than the first vestige, of this classic example of logorrhea and declare it not just null or just void, but null and void. May we not only cease or desist using “at this point in time,” may we cease and desist.

Speaking of “aches and pains,” “ranting and raving,” “bound and determined,” “null and void,” and “cease and desist,” English is riddled with the double jeopardy of these insidious pairs. Sure, some of them that look like redundancies aren’t. I know that in “kith and kin” *kin* are family and relatives while *kith* are friends and neighbors, that in “scrimp and save” *scrimp* means to be frugal while *save* means to put money away, that the *beck* in “beck and call” is a beckoning gesture while the *call* is a vocal command. I’ll even concede that in “bought and paid for” one can buy something without completely paying for it.

But over and above these few exceptions I do not, as I live and breathe, understand the whys and wherefores of many other various and sundry twosomes, in which the two halves (certainly not three or more halves) are for all intents and purposes one and the same and say the exact same thing. Caught betwixt and between such examples of linguistic conspicuous consumption, I shall not hem and haw or slip-slide. Just to pick and choose a few more examples, these hard-and-fast doublets are anything but fine and dandy, tip-top, well and good, hale and hearty, fair and just, and spick-and-span.

Redundancies are the junk food of our language. Alas and alack, when we gorge on the empty calories of pleonasm, we accumulate adipose tissue in the nooks and crannies of our linguistic waistline in dribs and drabs and bits and pieces–and I challenge you to tell me the differences between alas and alack, a nook and a cranny, a drib and a drab, and a bit and a piece. Indeed, in this day and age redundancies are multiplying by fits and starts and leaps and bounds. Rather than aiding and abetting these fattening snack-size doublets, let us find the ways and means to oppose them with all our vim and vigor and might and mane. Lo and behold, perhaps one day they will be over and done with and we shall be free and clear of them.

The consensus of opinion is that many of these pleonasm grow from a lack of appreciation for the root meanings of words, the source from whence (which means “from from where”) they come. Derived from the Latin *sensus*, meaning “opinion,” and *con-*, “a collection,” a consensus of opinion is a collection of opinion of opinion. Believe me, I know about these translingual redundancies. After all, I live right next door to Vermont. The citizens of that verdant patch of New England actually drive around with license plates proclaiming, “Vermont: The Green Mountain State,” which translates to “The Green Mountain State: The Green Mountain State,” if you’ll pardon my French. Other French misses show up on our menus– “roast beef with au jus” and “soup du jour of the day.” Be sure to record these in your daily journal.

If you know your Middle English, Greek, Anglo-French, Latin, Italian, Japanese, Malay, and Chinese (doesn’t everybody?), you will avoid talking about time and tide (which are simply “time and time”), Greenwich Village (“Greenvillage Village”), and epileptic seizure (“a seizure seizure”), beautiful calligraphy (“beautiful beautiful writing”), a bunch of grapes (“a bunch of a bunch of grapes”), a handwritten manuscript (“handwritten handwriting”), something that is very true (“truly true”), pizza pie (“pie pie”), a head honcho (“head head”), shrimp scampi (“shrimp shrimp”), rice paddy (“rice rice”), and the Gobi Desert (“the desert Desert”). Even “lukewarm” means “warm warm”!

Can we ever cure ourselves of our national addiction to fatty and fattening redundancies that ooze into our parlance anywhere and everywhere, over and over and again and again? I believe that we can. As the old adage goes, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Of course, by their very nature adages are old. That is how they get to be adages.

The sum total and end result (about a final as you can get) are that we can join together (more effective than joining apart) to fight the good fight against every single one of these redundancies. We can drive them from our house and home. We can bring them, in the words of many a flight attendant and police officer, to a complete stop, and we can kill them dead. That would be so incredible it would be unbelievable.